The Right People in the Right Positions on Your Bus.

An organization consists of its people. But people don’t just magically come together and stay together to accomplish common goals. In order to achieve its mission a university, like any organization, must recruit and retain the right people. To learn about how this is done, I spoke with Connie Butler, the director of human resources at Concordia University, Nebraska and with Kent Einspahr, the chair of the math/computer science department (and until recently also chair of the natural sciences department).

One driving factor driving the recruiting and retaining of employees is money. On the large scale, when the economy is good it is harder to find people for staff and professional/technical positions; this year it has been very easy to find qualified people for positions. The economy also influences retention, as people are much less likely to leave a position in a bad economy.

On the institutional scale, money also plays a large role in recruiting and retaining employees. When a position opens due to a person leaving or a new position being formed, the position must be budgeted before it can be filled. This decision is ultimately made by the president. Once an open position is identified and budgeted, money plays another important role in how the job is advertised. There is a very limited budget for recruiting faculty and staff, so jobs are mostly advertised in free or a few inexpensive venues – free websites (including Concordia’s own) and a few local newspapers. This limits the institution’s ability to advertise in some standard venues such as the Chronicle of Higher Education or professional journals. Fortunately there are more and more free websites available to post job openings, and recently Concordia received a grant from the city of Seward to use the services of Careerlink, a career connections service focusing on Nebraska and used by employment agencies throughout the state, which widens its ability to reach potential employees. Another hidden advantage to not advertising openings too widely is that Concordia has strict policies regarding the religious affiliation of its faculty, and advertising job openings on national venues would result in a large number of applications from individuals who would not ultimately be viable candidates.

The most successful method of recruiting for Concordia, however, involves neither technology nor large amounts of money. The best means of recruiting, especially for faculty and other highly technical positions, is through personal contacts. Faculty keep track of graduates who went on to graduate school and may be the next generation of teachers. Alumni keep in contact
with the university and notice positions which may be suitable for themselves or for someone in their congregations. Pastors refer members of their congregations. The CUS is an extremely valuable resource for potential employees. Through their connections with congregations, advertisements placed on the LCMS website, and an intentional effort visit and send informational materials to congregations in order to identify individuals who may have the background an interest to work (especially as a faculty member) at a Concordia, the people at the CUS office are a particularly rich source of candidates.

Besides the influence of the economy, there are other issues which affect Concordia’s ability to recruit employees. Being located in a small rural community means the local pool of potential employees is small. Most people who come to work at the university will have to relocate, and the size of the community limits the ability of spouses to find adequate employment. Having the city of Lincoln nearby helps, although the commute is daunting to some. The specific and often technical nature of the positions at Concordia also makes it difficult to fill some positions. This factor is further heightened by the proximity of several other colleges and universities, which compete for many of the same qualified personnel. Also, the additional requirements of being an LCMS institution make it more challenging to fill positions. Full-time faculty and many of the top administrators must be LCMS Lutheran, and other employees must be made aware of the mission, values and culture of Concordia, to make sure that they will be comfortable in the environment and a good fit. This further limits the pool of potential employees, and increases the challenge of filling positions.

Usually, though, through hard work and God’s guidance, positions at the university are filled. Once a person comes to work at Concordia, the institution needs to make sure that talented people stay. There are fewer explicit efforts at retention than there are for recruitment, but the university does have things to help make sure that employees remain. First and foremost is a work environment that emphasizes community, where employees generally have good relationships with coworkers and students. Also, the benefits at Concordia are relatively generous. When people do leave the institution, the community environment and the benefits are two things most often cited as positives about the workplace.

There are other things the university does to retain its workers. The system of professional development, especially for advanced degrees, is fairly generous. More could be done to improve professional development within the university, but this is a start. The human
resources office also researches the most effective means of retaining workers, especially in light of changing generational preferences. For instance, the younger generation of workers (those within four years of having finished their college degrees) are much more mobile than others, and have a much greater need for affirmation. So the human resources office has changed its performance reviews to express greater value for the skills of the employees, and has added an awards system where especially productive workers can small monetary awards for being especially productive. The institution is also investigating ways to implement a more explicit and effective career ladder, where workers who achieve specific milestones can look forward to specified increases in their responsibilities and salaries. This system is currently more informal, but workers increasingly want to know the system for advancement early on.

On the faculty side the system of professional development to encourage faculty to pursue advanced degrees is very effective. Beyond that, there are few explicit efforts at retention, besides the attractive nature of the job itself. Unfortunately funding for things like conference attendance is some of the first to be cut in times of tight budgets, and is rarely fully replaced when the economy improves.

There are a few things I would change about the systems for recruiting and retention, especially on the faculty side, where I am more familiar. First and most important, the system of searching for faculty is fundamentally broken, and endangers the future of the university if it is not fixed. Currently, the Board of Regents and the President approve faculty searches according to a haphazard schedule – sometimes immediately after a position opens, other times not until years later. Departments are unable to plan for searches, and often find out one is approved at a late date. A search may be approved early in the fall, but more often it cannot begin until winter or even spring. So many if not most faculty searches take place primarily in late spring and early summer. This reflects a view of academia based on elementary or high schools, and not higher education. In most of higher education, positions are advertised in the fall, and interviews take place in winter or early spring. When a position is not even advertised until spring, that guarantees that the (already small) pool of potential faculty, especially those already in higher education, will consist mostly of individuals who could not get a job elsewhere, and those who really are not interested in leaving their current position. Furthermore, once a search committee has identified its preferred candidate, the ultimate decision is made by the Board, again at a meeting that may be several months away. From my own personal experience with the process as I was hired, almost every person I knew told me not to come to Concordia because of this
system – if the hiring system was so dysfunctional, they said, how could the rest of the institution be any better? I have seen the same thinking played out with candidates in search committees I have served on. In order to fix the system, there needs to be more long-range forecasting, so that decisions about filling positions can be made earlier. Faculty searches must begin in the fall if Concordia expects to be able to continue to recruit top faculty. The president should be allowed to give approval for searches to begin, and for candidates to be approved, without waiting for Board approval.

There is also an ethical aspect to the current system. Faculty contracts say faculty must give six months’ notice to Concordia when they plan to leave. However, Concordia almost never extends that same courtesy to other institutions; instead Concordia insists on hiring people away from their current institutions with usually less than three months notice. That a religious institution could display such indifference to the “Golden Rule” speaks very poorly of it. If Concordia expects its faculty to give such long advance notice, it must give the same consideration to others by completing searches by early spring.

In terms of retaining employees, especially faculty, there are several things that could be done, most of which come down to having more money. Faculty are generally very satisfied with their salaries, and I have never known a faculty member to leave due to salary. Instead, the issues are usually related to low morale, based on limited opportunities, limited resources to improve a program, and ever-increasing workloads. Of course, everything about university life would be easier if the institution had greater resources. But some relatively easy changes could increase faculty morale considerably. Cutting departmental budgets has been a necessary but painful fact of life for several years. However, if every four or five years each department could see a one-year increase, to meet deferred needs, this would help morale considerably. Also, if funding for professional development such as conference attendance could be increased, that would help faculty feel more in touch with their disciplines. As it is, most faculty are unable to attend a professional conference more than maybe once a decade.

Institutions of higher education, and especially the Concordias, are generally fantastic places to work. The environment – being with committed workers around excited and energetic students – leads to satisfying and fulfilling work. So the process of recruiting and retaining employees, although it has its challenges, is one area where Concordia probably has an advantage over the
rest of the business world. People want to work at Concordia, and as long as it remains committed to its mission, this fact will not change.